Data and deviance: disintegrative shaming and exclusion in Queensland schools

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Interchange: A Quarterly Journal of Education

Abstract

It is the purpose of this study to determine the extent to which the implementation of the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) model and its focus on data-driven behaviour management has impacted on exclusion rates in Queensland public schools and, as such, the commitment of Queensland public schools to reintegration of students with behavioural issues. Using the open source data on student exclusion rates and the reasons for exclusion, it is possible to determine shifting patterns over the last 10 years. In doing so, it has been possible to identify how the approach to exclusion in Queensland public schools has changed in the period since the introduction of the OneSchool data aggregation software. An analysis of exclusion data shows that while long-term suspensions have decreased over the last 10 years, the rate of short-term suspension and exclusion has increased. There has been a particular increase in disciplinary absences related to conduct issues like refusal to participate in class, rather than more serious violations like physical violence or drug use. Using Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming model as a framework to analyse this behavioural exclusion data indicates that an over-reliance on exclusion is steering Queensland schools away from the principles of restorative justice, and has a negative impact on student outcomes.

Key Words

Discipline; student behaviour; suspension; expulsion; student attrition; school culture.

Introduction

In the modern era, schools have assumed a holistic responsibility for student development that goes beyond the simple delivery of curriculum. Along with the traditional academic studies that students are expected to engage in, it is the expectation that schools take a leading role in the socialisation process by reinforcing a standard set of communal norms that they will be expected to adhere to in a post-school environment (Safran & Oswald, 2003). No matter whether this aspect of the teaching process is accepted as a legitimate function of educational institutions or not, it is a fact that schools are increasingly becoming the central source of social learning in addition to the core business of academic instruction. Socialisation can take place through a diverse range of processes, not the least of which being the experiential process of school-based disciplinary action. Management of behavioural issues has always been a key concern of schools: student misbehaviour can not only impact on educational instruction, but also on the wellbeing of the student population in general. Whilst there has been a prominent push towards the practice of restorative justice in recent years, recently released data from the Australian state of Queensland suggests that the use of exclusionary-based disciplinary practices remain more prevalent than ever. Statistics from the 2017 school year show that more than 75 000 suspensions or expulsions took place across Queensland; though these statistics do not account for repeated action taken to discipline individual students, it indicates that Queensland schools are adopting a liberal use of their power to exclude students for behavioural misconduct issues ranging from physical violence to failure to comply with teacher instruction (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2018).

The use of a school's most serious disciplinary powers – that of exclusion – is a point of contention in behaviour management studies. While there are many who believe it is a principal's sovereign right to determine which students are welcome in their school, there is general consensus that use of this strategy should be reserved for only the most serious of cases. Braithwaite's shaming model can be drawn on as a paradigm for analysing the impact of behaviour management in schools: in this respect, the use of exclusionary practices could be considered a prime example of disintegrative shaming wherein a student's misconduct is dealt with in a way that precludes them from re-engaging with the very community that their behaviour impacted on. Braithwaite's theory suggests that reintegrative shaming results in preferable outcomes both for students and the wider school community; under this model, a

student must directly deal with the consequences of their action, feel a sense of shame for their actions, and then be presented with a pathway to be reintegrated into the community in a redemptive manner **(**Braithwaite, 1989**)**. Though there is a role for short-term suspensions and other limited exclusionary strategies in the process of reintegrative shaming, the booming rate of suspensions and expulsions in Queensland schools is more indicative of a zero tolerance approach in which students are removed from school communities without being given a reasonable opportunity to make amends for their actions, and adjust their behaviours to meet normative standards. By becoming overly-reliant on exclusion as a behaviour management strategy, schools do a disservice to their student clientele by shirking their anointed responsibility to engage in social learning that prepares young people for life in a post-school environment.

Literature review

Adoption of zero tolerance exclusionary policies in schools is not a unique peculiarity of the Queensland education system; indeed, the evolution of this seemingly increasing preference for suspensions and expulsions can be charted through the literature as a phenomenon that is occurring in school systems across the industrialised world. Skiba and Peterson (1999) suggest that zero tolerance policies became an in vogue strategy for school administrators as early as 1989 in the United States of America, with high schools issuing mandatory exclusions for serious misconduct like the possession of illicit drugs or gang activity. Skiba and Peterson assert that in spite of the relatively limited scope of early zero tolerance policies, by the end of the 20th Century 'increasingly broad interpretations of zero tolerance [had] resulted in a near epidemic of suspensions and expulsions for seemingly trivial events' (1999, p. 4). In a later study focused on the efficacy of zero tolerance, Skiba goes on to note that 'controversial applications of the policy are not idiosyncratic, but may be inherent in zero tolerance philosophy'(2000, p. 3); he argues that there is little evidence to suggest that the severe punishments issued under zero tolerance have any significant impact on behavioural outcomes. Fabelo et al (2011) go further in their analysis of the impact of zero tolerance as it pertains to a student's future engagement with the justice system. It was a key finding of their study that students that were suspended or expelled from school were exponentially more likely to come before the juvenile justice system than those that were dealt with on an intra-school basis; the

educational and social results of zero tolerance were particularly notable in students that were suspended or excluded on more than one occasion, with the scale of negative outcomes increasing in conjunction with the rate of exposure to exclusionary policies.

Just as these studies share the perspective that zero tolerance policies are a central factor in perpetuating negative outcomes for students, the majority of literature on the subject reflects the general belief that a multifaceted system of restorative justice is required to break the cycle of continuous exclusionary action. Hawkins et al (1999) claim that a combination of approaches may be necessary to address student misbehaviour in a way that has a lasting impact. Rather than issuing severe and exclusionary sanctions they suggest strategies such as conflict resolution instruction, positive reinforcement, parental involvement and early intervention programs for at-risk students; Skiba and Peterson strongly advocate in favour of this position, reinforcing the belief that 'punishment, especially punishment alone, cannot teach new behaviour' (2000, p. 342). Adopting a restorative justice model of behaviour management was also found to be the most beneficial solution by Casella (2003), who found that the rate of recidivism in excluded students mirrored that which has been identified in adults who had experienced incarceration. Casella recommended that the process of restorative justice should be paired with formal social instruction designed to teach students how to avoid repetition of inappropriate behaviours, even in cases where students have engaged in acts of violence. Kang-Brown et al (2013) argue that keeping students in school rather than excluding them for misbehaviour has a strong correlation with educational outcomes based on their study marking 25 years of zero tolerance policies. Based on their research, they found that 'misconduct alone does not necessarily lead to poor academic performance… [however] out-of-school suspension can severely disrupt a student's academic progress in ways that have lasting negative consequences' (Kang-Brown et al, 2013, p. 5).

The concept of reintegrative shaming outlined by Braithwaite in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989) is intrinsically linked to the concept of restorative justice as it is applied in a school-discipline context. Braithwaite argues that there are two pathways by which deviance can be addressed: disintegrative and reintegrative shaming. He defines disintegrative shaming as a form of stigmatisation in which 'no effort is made to reconcile the offender with the community… [their] deviance is allowed to become a master status' **(**Braithwaite, 1989, p.

101). Isolation and exclusion is at the core of this disintegrative process, which Braithwaite claims is more likely to result in offenders continuing their patterns of misbehaviour and forming deviant subcultures with other similarly stigmatised social outcasts. Braithwaite's theory is in many ways informed by Becker's concept of labelling, which itself posits that individuals that are labelled as deviant are more likely to take on a deviant role in society in response to their socially-constructed identity as such (Becker, 1973). Rather than being overly punitive in dealing with deviance, reintegrative shaming is proposed as a more positive approach to negative behaviours; this process serves as a form of social control in which offenders are made to take responsibility for their actions, and are subject to a sense of shame arising from community disapproval (Braithwaite, 1989). Braithwaite asserts that 'shaming' deviant offenders, yet still allowing them the opportunity to re-join the community that they are a part of, allows the individual to maintain a sense of self-respect and social belonging that prevents further deviance by giving credence to the potential for social redemption through communitarian attitudes (1989, p. 14). Although this theory was initially applied to society on the whole, it can be modified for use in the microcosm of a school community, and provide critical insights into the role that restorative justice has to play in the formation of effective behaviour management strategies.

Approaches to behaviour management and a rationale for exclusionary policies in the Queensland education system

As it is in most places, behaviour management is an area of key concern in the Queensland education system. Unlike many other jurisdictions, there is a strong historical tradition of restorative justice when it comes to engagement in deviant behaviour by Queensland youth. It was the first state in the nation to form a dedicated Juvenile Aid Bureau (JAB) in 1963; staffed by police officers that were explicitly trained to deal with adolescents, it was the official mandate of the JAB to counsel-and-caution young offenders and engage them in diversionary strategies designed to minimise their interaction with the judicial system (Simpson, 1968). Apart from a brief reprieve in the mid-1970s, this policy of reintegrative shaming served as the primary method for managing the behaviour of young people in Queensland well into the 1990s. By the mid-1990s, restorative justice programs had been rolled out in schools across Queensland and were being used by administrators to deal with a range of behavioural issues;

while primarily used as a strategy of intervention in cases of physical and verbal bullying, techniques like community conferencing were employed in a diverse set of circumstances from illicit drug use to truanting (Cameron & Thorsborne, 1999). A study conducted by Education Queensland found that schools that had adopted restorative justice programs reported a high level of satisfaction with this reintegrative approach to behaviour management (Department of Education [DOE], 1996). Nevertheless, Cameron and Thorsborne (1999) found that in spite of the increasingly prevalent take-up of restorative justice practices, a control paradigm had become embedded in Queensland education system that resulted in after-the-fact punitive responses to misconduct instead of taking a proactive student-centric approach.

To some extent, the dominant control paradigm that was perceived to exist in Queensland schools was formalised by state administrators with the adoption of the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) system in the early 2000s. A variation on the Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model that was developed in the United States of America in the 1980s, PBL focuses on implementing what it describes as a 'whole-school approach' to behaviour management (Dutton Tillery et al, 2010). On paper, the PBL model has much in common with behaviour management systems with a heavy focus on reintegration: as is the case under restorative justice, the focus of PBL is less on reactive punishment than it is on proactive prevention of student misbehaviour. Proponents of PBL argue that 80 percent of students can be reached when a school firmly establishes a set of communal behaviour goals that serve as overarching expectations for the entire school community; alongside these overarching expectations, it is incumbent on school administrators to make the disciplinary consequences for non-compliance clear, and to impose punitive measures fairly and consistently across all students (Sugai & Horner, 2006). These components of the PBL system strongly adhere to the tenets of reintegrative shaming, a process which is predicated on the issuance of consistent and strict social sanctions to any who deviate from normative conduct that has been clearly established (Braithwaite, 1989). Indeed, the clear establishment of a behavioural 'code of conduct' that all students are expected to follow is an essential component in the social learning process that reintegrative shaming is designed to facilitate. While it may appear that PBL is merely an extension of the restorative justice model, there are other aspects of the program that could be seen to reinforce the control paradigm of behaviour management, and contribute to the increasing level of exclusions taking place in Queensland schools year-to-year.

At the heart of the whole-school perspective championed by the PBL model is the necessity of a data-driven approach to behaviour management. PBL acknowledges that student behaviour goes beyond the classroom, and misconduct can influence school dynamics whether it occurs in the playground, while participating in extra-curricular activities or even off-campus (Sugai et al, 2000). There is a need, therefore, to aggregate all of the information available on each student in order to form a holistic picture of their conduct and, ideally, use this data to create action plans that can be used to address any behavioural issues; it is imperative under the PBL that both negative and positive conduct is recorded, in order to avoid the formation of negativity-bias in administrative decision-making (Solomon et al, 2012). To encourage this model of data-driven behaviour management, schools in Queensland have adopted the computer-based recording system OneSchool, which is used by teachers and administrators to keep up-to-date records of a student's academic performance and behavioural conduct. It is the intent of the program that OneSchool is used to record both positive and negative information, in accordance with the standards of the PBL model; in reality, OneSchool often serves solely as a repository of records of student misconduct that can be used at a later date to justify punitive action like a suspension or exclusion (Merrett, 2015). Far from identifying opportunities for intervention using methods of restorative justice, data-driven behaviour management can often result in school administrators looking at a student's overall pattern of behaviour instead of incidences of misconduct in isolation. It is also a directive of the PBL model that administrators make the smallest change possible to affect the biggest impact in a school's behaviour management plan (Flannery et al, 2010); if the data suggests that a student is repeatedly cited for behavioural misconduct, it may seem reasonable to administrators that removing that student from the school community would be the most simple way of improving the learning environment for the vast majority of students.

Exclusion as a behaviour management tactic in Queensland schools

Currently, there are five separate categories of 'disciplinary absence' that a student attending an Education Queensland-operated facility can be issued with. Short-term suspensions of up to ten days is the most frequently used of these exclusionary strategies. Long suspensions for more serious conduct can remain in place for between 11 and 20 school days, while a charge-

related suspension can be applied if a student is facing criminal charges and will last until that charge is resolved in court or otherwise dealt with (Department of Education, Training and Employment [DETE], 2014). In the most serious cases, an exclusion can be used to prohibit students from attending certain Education Queensland schools, while a cancellation of enrolment can be issued if a post-compulsory age student displays conduct warranting removal from the school community. Principals in Queensland were given expanded powers to exclude students under the *Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Act 2013* (QLD), which designated a greater range of justifiable reasons for exclusion in the public education system. These 'reasons' for behavioural misconduct are not prioritised in order of severity and, at the discretion of school administrators, a student could be faced with sanctions ranging from a short-term suspension to a permanent exclusion for engaging in any inappropriate activity as proscribed by the legislation. Under the current powers afforded to principals by Education Queensland, students may be excluded from attending a public school for behaviour ranging from serious physical misconduct or illicit drug use, to more minor offences like 'refusal to participate in the program of instruction' or the seemingly catch-all category of 'other conduct prejudicial to the good order and management of the school' (DET, 2018).

Data released by Education Queensland clearly shows that the rate of disciplinary absences issued to students has experienced a significant rise across the state in recent years. In the 2006 school year, the combined number of all suspensions and exclusions issued to Queensland students was 49 939 (DETE, 2014, p. 6); while this is not an insignificant number, it is considerably lower than the statistics from a decade later, with the combined tally of disciplinary exclusions in reaching 73 408 by the 2016 school year (DET, 2017, p. 2). Whilst the data does not indicate how many individual students were subject to disciplinary absences, and it is likely that many faced more than one throughout each school year, a rise of 23 469 exclusionary sanctions over ten years suggests that administrators are using their powers liberally as a part of their school's overarching behaviour management strategy. Analysis of a breakdown of the specific types of exclusions issued to students indicates that the most significant contributory factor to this rise in disciplinary absences comes from a year-on-year increase in short-term suspension between 2006 and 2017. Aside from a small decrease in the short-term suspension rate between 2006 and 2007, the application of exclusionary periods of up to ten days rose consistently over the past decade; over the four years between 2012 and

2016 alone, the number of short-term suspensions issued in Queensland rose from 54 524 to 67 972, while the rate of exclusion and cancellation remained fairly stable and the rate of long-term suspensions experienced a dramatic decrease from 7 220 in 2012 to 2 677 in 2016 (DET, 2017, p. 2). An increase in short-term suspensions, coupled with a decrease in long-term suspensions, indicates a greater willingness to use the more minor of the exclusionary powers more frequently as a standard aspect of student disciplinary procedure. It also suggests that, while there has been a decreasing need to deal with serious misconduct with long-term suspension, school administrators are more likely to engage in exclusionary action for the types of minor offences that would warrant short-term suspensions, rather than engaging in alternative strategies more likely to encourage reintegration into the school community.

The impact of PBL and the adoption of its data-driven behaviour management approach is plain to see when assessing the statistics on disciplinary absences in Queensland since 2006. It is important to recall that the mid-2000s was a period of considerable paradigmatic change in Queensland education: not only did it mark the early introduction of PBL in the state, the introduction of the OneSchool student profiling system in 2007 further drove the implementation of data-informed behaviour management strategies (Dutton Tillery et al, 2010; Merrett, 2015). In the year prior to the introduction of OneSchool, there were 1060 students permanently excluded from schools across Queensland; by the time OneSchool had been in operation for only five years, the number of permanently excluded students had more than doubled to 2352 students in 2011 (DETE, 2014, p. 6). Given that these figures represent students permanently sanctioned and not welcomed in Education Queensland schools, they can be considered more reliable figures that represent individual students rather than multiple suspensions issued to the same students repeatedly. This rise over a period of five years is incredibly significant, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that it was not precipitated by some systemic change that impacted on all Education Queensland facilities state-wide. The introduction of the data-driven perspective championed by PBL and facilitated by OneSchool was one such cultural shift that occurred at exactly the time that permanent exclusions began to rise across Queensland (Dutton Tillery et al, 2010). It could be suggested, thus, that the rising rate of exclusion can be attributed directly to the aggregation of behaviour management data on students, and the philosophical perspective that removing ‘problem students’ was the best way to manage student conduct on a whole-school level. In this sense, schools effectively

reinterpret the focus on community sanction in PBL as exclusion and isolation, rather than engaging in a process of reintegrative shaming predicated on the principles restorative justice.

'Outsiders' and the role of permanent exclusions as a form of disintegrative shaming

Even if a school has adopted a policy of reintegration and restorative justice, there is occasional cause for the use of exclusion as a disciplinary tool in serious cases. In instances where physical violence has occurred, or a student's continued presence at a school poses a clear and present threat to the safety and well-being of other students, there is often no other option than to remove deviant offenders from the school community (Noguera, 1995). If a school is engaging in reintegrative practices in which exclusion is used as an absolute last resort, it would be expected that the statistics would show a significantly higher number of exclusions issued for physical misconduct as opposed to more minor procedural misbehaviour. Data released by Education Queensland for the 2017 school year does not reflect this projected result: data from the five largest schools in the state, catering for 15 102 students, showed that there were 359 disciplinary absences imposed on students for varying types of physical misconduct (DET, 2018). This figure is only marginally higher than the 298 students who were faced exclusionary sanctions for 'refusal to participate in the program of instruction' and 'other conduct prejudicial to the good order and management of the school'. Whilst schools unquestionably have a duty of care when it comes to ensuring the safety of their students, it is equally as indisputable that procedural matters like the refusal to participate in school programs does not qualify as a direct threat to the safety of the student population; as a result, the use of exclusionary tactics for procedural misconduct can be interpreted as an inappropriate use of a sanction that should only be reserved for the most serious of offences. No matter what the inciting offence was that led to exclusion, the isolating effect of a disciplinary absence can be just as impactful when it comes to labelling students as deviant 'outsiders' (Mendez & Sanders, 1981).

In describing the practice of disintegrative shaming, Braithwaite notes that in 'cultures which rely heavily on punishment, exclusion and stigma for social control, irreversibility is much more of a problem than in cultures characterised by reintegrative shaming' (1989, p. 18). In his view, it is the process of exclusion and stigmatisation itself that reinforces negative behaviours

by punishing students rather than addressing the behavioural misconduct itself. Braithwaite's views on the impact of disintegrative shaming is strongly aligned with the outcomes predicted under the variation of social labelling theory outlined by Becker (1973). It was Becker's belief that society labels behaviours that it consider deviant, and thus individuals who partake in these behaviours are themselves categorised as deviant; it was Becker's contention that it is common for these societal 'outcasts' to band together and form deviant subcultures based primarily on their experiences of exclusion from mainstream society. Becker's position on the formation of deviant subcultures is reflected in Braithwaite's concept of reintegration: he argues that just because an individual experiences disintegrative shaming and is excluded from one subculture, this does not mean that he cannot be *reintegrated* into another, separate subpopulation. He claims that 'when a student is rejected by the status system of the school – is labelled incorrigible or a failure – he has a status problem… he solves it collectively with other students who have been similarly rejected by the school' (1989, p. 67). If the exclusion of students without appropriate programs of reintegration is to be considered an example of disintegrative shaming, it must thereby follow that the increasing use of punitive isolation provides only a short-term solution to a school's behavioural problems; in the long-term, the use of such disintegrative policies can only be seen to be adding to the formation of deviant subcultures based on the formal exclusion from mainstream society imposed by school administrators.

A solution designed to prevent further deviance by excluded students, and others that may present behaviour management concerns, is the introduction of alternative flexi-schools to the Queensland education landscape. Sanctioned and supported by the state, these facilities are designed to allow for the delivery of individualised flexible learning programs for students who are otherwise unable to participate in a traditional program of study offered in a mainstream school (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Though flexi-schools are intended to cater for students with a range of challenges, whether that be a marginalised background or personal hardship, it is an increasingly common trend for students that are excluded from mainstream educational facilities to be referred to a flexi-school to continue their education. A 2016 study funded by the Australian Research Council found that schools were the single largest source for referrals to flexi-schools, with 36.36 percent of students involved in the study entering into alternative education in this way; when combined with recommendations from social workers or the juvenile justice system, the total level of students that received formal referrals to flexi-schools in Queensland rises to 71.61 percent (Mills & McGregor, 2016, p. 23). Whilst it is true that not

all students receiving formal referrals do so as a result of disciplinary issues, the source of these referrals indicates that a significant number of students enter into these flexi-schools as a result of behavioural issues triggering intervention whilst engaged in traditional educational facilities. Nevertheless, the study found that around 82 percent of students attending flexi-schools reported satisfaction with the program that they were engaged in (Mills & McGregor, 2016, p. 21). While the educational outcomes for students at these facilities is undoubtedly better than if they were excluded without an alternative option, the effect of labelling attendees as irreversibly deviant clearly constitutes the perpetuation of a disintegrative strategy that has been observed to inherently facilitate the formation of subcultures built on self-identification as deviant (Braithwaite, 1989). As flexi-schools are a relatively recent addition to the Queensland education system, there is little data on which to judge whether labelling has a tangible impact on the perpetuation of deviance; this is an area that will require further investigation and, ultimately, a longitudinal analysis of their efficacy in future years.

Conclusion

Analysis of data on disciplinary absences issued by Queensland schools since the implementation of the PBL model and OneSchool program suggests there is clear evidence that a data-driven approach to student management has precipitated a significant increase in the rate at which exclusion is used as a strategy for addressing behavioural misconduct. Data released by Education Queensland shows a 47 percent rise in the issuance of disciplinary absences to student between 2006 and 2016; this increase represents more than 20 000 additional exclusionary sanctions issued over the course of ten years, and coincides directly with the implementation of a new management model designed to replace the previous paradigm of restorative justice (DET, 2018). Although the introduction of flexi-schools is a step in the right direction when it comes to providing an alternative option to students excluded from Queensland schools, their efficacy remains untested when it comes to both academic outcomes and the perpetuation of deviant misconduct. While these facilities may prove to have a positive influence in meeting the needs of students with behavioural issues, it is nevertheless difficult to discount the impact that exclusion from mainstream education has on the social development of students faced with exclusion. The process of labelling students as deviant ‘outsiders’ is cemented by the decision by school administrators to exclude them from the

school community, and results in a form of disintegrative shaming that fundamentally alters the way in which they both respond to and interact with the community-at-large (Braithwaite, 1989). Most importantly, a school that engages in the practice of disintegrative shaming inevitably shapes the self-perception of its students and contributes to the internalisation of a deviant identity that can manifest in increasingly overt expressions of deviant behaviour.

In spite of the disintegrative impact that it can have on students, there will always be a need for school administrators to wield the ultimate sanction of formal exclusion. School administrators have a duty of care that requires them to provide for the safety and security of all students, and at times this will require them to make the choice to permanently exclude a student that demonstrates behaviour precluding them from being reintegrated into the school community (Mendez & Sanders, 1981). Removing a student for persistent, dangerous conduct or extreme acts of violence is a reasonable response that fulfils this responsibility to the wider school community; where problems arise is in the liberal use of exclusionary policies for minor offences which do not impact on the safety of the student body and could be summarily dealt with through a policy of reintegrative shaming that draws on the principles of restorative justice. Recent statistics show that the number of students excluded for procedural misconduct is almost at parity with those excluded for physical misconduct, and it is this situation that highlights the tendency of Queensland school administrators to issue exclusions as first preference rather than a last resort. No matter if a student has committed a physical assault or refused to participate in a classroom activity, the practice of excluding them has the same stigmatising impact regardless; to use this sanction to deal with minor behavioural issues that could be alternatively dealt with in a way that promotes reintegration is a disservice to students, and a misuse of a policy that should be reserve for only the most serious offences.

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